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SUMMER BOOKS

L.A. IS THE CAPITAL OF KANSAS
BY RICHARD MELTZER
Harmony Books, 246 pages, $16.95 hardcover.

"'I'm the only writer I know,' I explained, 'who came here not to write screenplays.' His response: 'Yeah, sure, tell me another one.' Well, heck, it was — and is — the only one I have to tell."
—Richard Meltzer

TROPIC OF MELTZER

BY JONATHAN GOLD

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RICHARD MELTZER HATES L.A. I meet him in a dark and fragrant bar on the fringe of West Hollywood, a faded old place reeking of cigarettes, Old Spice and spilled soy sauce, decorated with curling glamour photographs of celebrities like Buddy Ebsen and Ida Lupino. The blaring television in the corner, tuned to a home-shopping station, is watched intently by a gnarled stick of a woman with a violent tic that every so often jerks her left arm up nearly to the level of her ear. I order an Old Fashioned from the rheumy bartender (Amstel Light for Meltzer) and slide into a lumpy corner booth.

I ask him *why* L.A. is the capital of Kansas. He sucks on his beer, digs through his pockets for a dozen or so 3-by-5 index cards on which he has, like Reagan, scribbled conversation prompters. He checks my tape recorder to make sure it's working (as it turns out, it's not). He rehearses his litany of discontent:

1. He's a goddamn *writer* in a town where nobody reads.
2. L.A. is a hick town, *the* hick town, without decent bars, enough jazz or a competitive hockey team — the cultural capital of this outhouse of a republic.
3. Television is the aorta at the heart of the beast. Anybody vile enough to work for THIS TV should be nailed to a wall and eaten by rats.
4. In New York, at the *Voice*, people hated him for being anti-intellectual; here they hate him because he's *too* intellectual.
5. Jackson Browne hates him because of an early-'70s *Rolling Stone* profile that unfavorably contrasted his then-present work with what he did as a 17-year-old poet who hung out with Nico.
6. Even if there were places *1,000* times better than L.A., which he doubts, they still wouldn't be enough better to justify moving.
7. He would like one day to earn a middle-class income, but hasn't yet.
8. Every journalist but him is beholden to the feed tube.
9. Because of that, he refuses to write criticism, most particularly rock criticism.
10. Nobody sends him records in the mail anymore.

Meltzer has, since his emergence from the primordial slop of earliest rockwrite, maintained an integrity inconsistent with paying the rent. When I was a teenager, when any five minutes of Germs or Nervous Gender meant more than all the Bartok in the world, Meltzer was the only local writer worth caring about. I hadn't read — still haven't — his famous dada spew in early rockmags like *Creem* and *Crawdaddy*, the coruscating reviews and profiles that got him thrown off record-company comp lists faster than you could strum IV-V-I. But what I had read was stunning, bite-size bullets of prose that were Burroughs-propulsive yet taut; his language unrestrained, extremely vernacular, yet rigorous as Camus. At that point he had occasional cranky pieces about boxing in the *Weekly*, an astonishing punk-rock radio show, *Hepcats From Hell*, on KPFK 'til 6 on Sunday mornings, a book of brilliant culturecrit essays, *Gulcher*, which you could pick up for $0.99 from a laden table at Pic 'N Save, and the best-ever restaurant column (in a throwaway called *Snuff*) — he, if I remember correctly, panned a meal at a girlfriend's house, paying special attention to the oppressive decor of her bathroom. There were poems — "Jackie O, Her Asshole and Cunny," stuff like that — that he read at Al's Bar, also a book, *Aesthetics of Rock* (stole my copy from the school music library; snuck it back at end of term), hermetic and incomprehensible as anything by Derrida or Baudrillard, that read a lot like how a scratchy Albert Ayler solo sounds.

From *Slash* to *Slop* to *Sluggo*, 500 fanzine writers copped his riffs and made a joyful noise unto the bored.

L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas, a hep volume you'll be proud to be seen with and Meltzer's first new full-length book since *Gulcher* in 1972, is a topical selection of I-hate-L.A. magazine work he's written since moving here from New York 12 years ago — mostly extracted from his column at the *Reader*, but also including pieces commissioned by the *Weekly*, the *Voice* and *Forced Exposure*. This collection, often as darkly funny as Joseph Heller or Celine, should — at last — vault Meltzer to the national prominence he deserves. Maybe his name will appear in a sentence without Lester Bangs'.

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Over time, pop-culture critics, even good ones, tend to lapse into either good-natured senility or abstruse academicism: cf. Dave Marsh, Greil Marcus. The deconstructionists had the right idea, placing the burden of the creative process on critics, and for a while in the early '70s, the clatter from the typewriters of Meltzer, Nick Tosches and Bangs dismantled and subverted the conventions of rock & roll far more efficiently than the actual musicians ever did. But it's no fun to pass judgment on shiny plastic objects designed to entertain 14-year-olds week after week for years, until you feel you have no issues left to discuss that you haven't already, definitively, in 1972.

Tosches reverted to slick mainstream book-writing, the late Bangs to the recreational use of cough syrup. Meltzer's cultural criticism collapsed into itself like a white-hot dwarf star whose density approaches infinity, integral architectonic units whose close-fitted prose yields to neither editing nor excerpting. (It's next to impossible to quote Meltzer — it comes out something like, "'S late and quilters must SLEEP . . . but not to late to see SHEEP. Baa-ing their pipes off and looking V. STUPID IN THEIR PEN while they pee in the sawdust," even when the funniest line of a terrific essay. Though his pieces cohere, individual sentences out of context seem to be working too hard.)

Meltzer's life, his writing, has recently become internalized to the point that he rarely leaves his apartment, and his brief sorties out are like the opening of a shutter on a camera. In *Kansas*, he captures sharp, idiosyncratic snapshots of such ephemeral L.A. phenomena as jailhouse tattoos, Corman mutants, and an actress with a walk-on part on *Fame*, but mostly of himself as he swaggers through burger stands, bedrooms and movie sets, always a capital "I."

Meltzer's humanity is rarely evident in any single magazine piece, but over the course of the 40 essays in the book, it becomes clear that compassion lurks behind the veneer of braggadocio, pathos behind the rant. Those who know his work chiefly from his recent *Weekly* pieces may be surprised by his range, and the spare, controlled power of his rhetoric. The people who have always hated Meltzer's columns will hate this even more — its sheer mass just makes his message more persuasive. I could say *Kansas* is a true connoisseur's book, a brilliant tour de force, a timeless childhood classic, the best cork-room stuff since Proust, but I'll leave it at this: Any writer who pisses off people enough to get death threats is okay by me. ■

There is a book-signing party for Richard Meltzer this Friday, July 22, 6 p.m., at Book Soup, 8818 W. Sunset Blvd., W. Hlywd.

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